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ABSTRACT

A survey of teachers of composition in English as a Second Language in Japan addressed the perceptions of native-English-speaking and non-native-English-speaking teachers of the acceptability of specific error types within sentences. The native speakers of English were one British and 16 Americans. The non-native group was comprised of 26 Japanese English teachers who were from a variety of school types, including elementary schools, cram schools, junior high schools, vocational schools, language schools, and universities. All non-native speakers had had substantial experience in an English-speaking country. Results showed little difference in the error perceptions of native and non-native speakers; only 3 errors were perceived differently in 14 error categories by the two groups. The findings support earlier research conclusions that the more an error obscures meaning, the less it is tolerated. It is concluded that language teachers should take a moderate course between consistent correction and non-correction of student errors, offering support without discouraging student efforts to communicate. (MSE)

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学生と英作文に於けるエラー - 日本人教師とネイティブ教師の評価

ブラント・M・クレソヴィッチ

英作文担当の教師が学習者のエラーを正すためには、他の教師のエラーの容認度も知る必要が有る。この調査は日本人教師とネイティブ教師のエラーの容認度に関するものである。両者のエラーの容認度はほぼ一致しているが、綴りと主張の動詞を含む節のエラーは日本人教師の方がネイティブより厳しいが、Of/s 属格のエラーはネイティブの方が厳しいことが分かった。

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Evaluating the writing of EFL students is a laborious and time-consuming process. There are many factors to consider while judging the overall quality of written work: grammar and usage, linguistic complexity and sophistication, communicability, vocabulary range and appropriate word choice, length, spelling and mechanics, organization and development (English Language Center, 1981). In addition, all these factors must be considered simultaneously (Peterson & Kresovich, 1985). There is still a question whether objective measures such as T-unit and clause length accurately predict the quality of a composition (Shortreed & Kelly, 1983; Crowhurst, 1982); therefore, as long as objective guidelines do not exist, composition teachers must rely on subjective evaluations of the above factors when they judge student writing. For example, some teachers may note a composition's length and mechanics before reading it (Munsell, 1985). Some might evaluate on the basis of intelligibility (Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982). Because educators have different criteria for evaluating writing and lack an explicit consensus on what constitutes acceptable prose, writing instructors in both ESL and EFL settings are in a dilemma (Vann, et al, 1984). Should teaching rules of grammatical correctness be stressed over familiarizing students with English patterns of prose content, development, and organization? If not, how can the two areas be balanced and taught?

Perhaps a fruitful starting point to answer such questions is to ask the audience of EFL writers what it thinks of learners' errors in writing. The main readership of students' writing, then, ordinarily consists of English professors and teachers who are both native and non-native speakers of English. Discovering their attitudes toward syntactic, semantic, and stylistic errors may give composition teachers an idea of what errors are perceived to be serious by the audience. Given this information, composition teachers can then address their time and effort to remedial work rather than using precious hours marking every or nearly every error in literally hundreds of compositions every term. So, the purpose of this study was to answer the following questions. Do teachers in an EFL setting react to various types of errors in different ways? If teachers do perceive errors in different lights, could native language account for such different evaluations?

Previous Studies

There have been a number of studies which have attempted to ascertain native speaker judgements of non-native speakers' errors in speaking and writing. Some research closely related to error analysis has sought to the focus on the reaction of the native speaker rather than on the production of the learner (Vann, Meyer, and Lorenze, 1984). A review of these studies can be found in Ludwig (1982). The most provocative finding from this body of research indicates that native speakers do not judge all errors as equally intolerable, but rank errors in a hierarchy.

Studies that have attempted to determine if errors are assessed according to differing criteria include Vann, Meyer and Lorenze (1984), Khalil (1985), Hughes and Lascaratou (1982), James (1977), and Sheorey (1986). In a large study involving Iowa State University professors, Vann, Meyer and Lorenze (1984) found the 164 respondents did not evaluate all errors in the same way, but constructed a hierarchy of errors. Khalil (1985) reported that semantic errors were judged less intelligible and interpretable than grammar errors. Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) found that non-native and native speaking English teachers differ in their error perceptions in that the former are less tolerant of learner's errors. James (1977) began his study with the observation that ESL teachers probably do refer consistently to

subjective criteria based on "degrees of erroneousess when they mark compositions although they do not explicitly formulate these criteria." Inspired by James (1977) and Hughes and Lascaratou (1982), Sheorey (1986) compared error perceptions of American and Indian English teachers and found the native speakers more tolerant than the non-native speakers, and that specific types of errors are often perceived differently by the two groups. In general, these studies tend to support the thesis of Burt and Kiparsky (1972) which states, "(T)he worst mistakes are those that interfere with comprehension and communication while unimportant mistakes do not greatly interfere with communication."

The Study

Categories of common errors committed by learners of English were formed following Bryant's research (1984) on typical mistakes made by Japanese ESL students, Vann's (1984) survey of 10 ESL writing instructors, and my own personal experience. Then, I chose examples of such errors from students' compositions during the second term of the academic year 1986-87 (*Showa 61*). The general level of those sophomore English majors ranged from intermediate to advanced in their writing skills. In total, fourteen types of errors were selected from their compositions for this study: subject/verb agreement, tense, article, preposition, misplacement of judgemental clause (misusing expressions such as "I think" or "I guess" or "I suppose" at the end of sentences), unidiomatic use of negative clauses, misuse of *of* or *-s* genitive, spelling, word form, relative clause, comma splice/run-on sentence, word order, word choice, and aspect.¹ Because Japanese students often commit more than one mistake in a sentence, I corrected the other errors in the example sentences to focus the attention of the respondents. Thus, I re-wrote 28 sentences that contained one error, because there were two sentences for each of the 14 error categories (See Appendix).

The Subjects

The subjects in this study were native and non-native speakers of English. The native speakers were one British and 16 Americans. All of the native speakers were full or part-time teachers in Okinawa prefecture, Japan. The non-native group was comprised of 26 Japanese English teachers: 19 university professors, two teachers from a prefectural language school, two vocational school (*senmon gakko*) teachers, and one each from a junior high school, an English school for children, and a cram school (*juku*). Unlike many non-native teachers of EFL in Japan, most of the Japanese teachers (especially the professors at the University of the Ryukyus) who participated in this study had substantial experience living, studying, and perhaps even working in the United States or United Kingdom so they had much exposure to native speakers. This is in contrast with the Indian subjects in Sheorey (1986).

The Procedure

The 28 sentences were presented to the two groups with a cover letter explaining the background of the study in general terms. The teachers were asked to use a scale to respond to the errors, and the scale was explained briefly at the top of the questionnaire (see Appendix). The contents of the cover letter also stressed that teachers should not mark or correct the error but respond as quickly and intuitively as possible. It was thought that encouragement to do the form quickly would increase response. The scale attempted to consider both the

audience of the writing, the writing error, and the amount of attention to editing that went into the assignment. The scale used here was an attempt to be more specific and explicit than those used in earlier studies. For example, the scale used in Vann, Meyer, and Lorenze (1984) was a 5-point acceptability scale with 1 being "intolerable in all academic situations" and 5 being "tolerable in all academic situations," including dissertations. These two extremes are quite clear, but what exactly do "2, 3, 4" mean? After considering these details, I decided to use the scale from Peterson and Kresovich (1985).

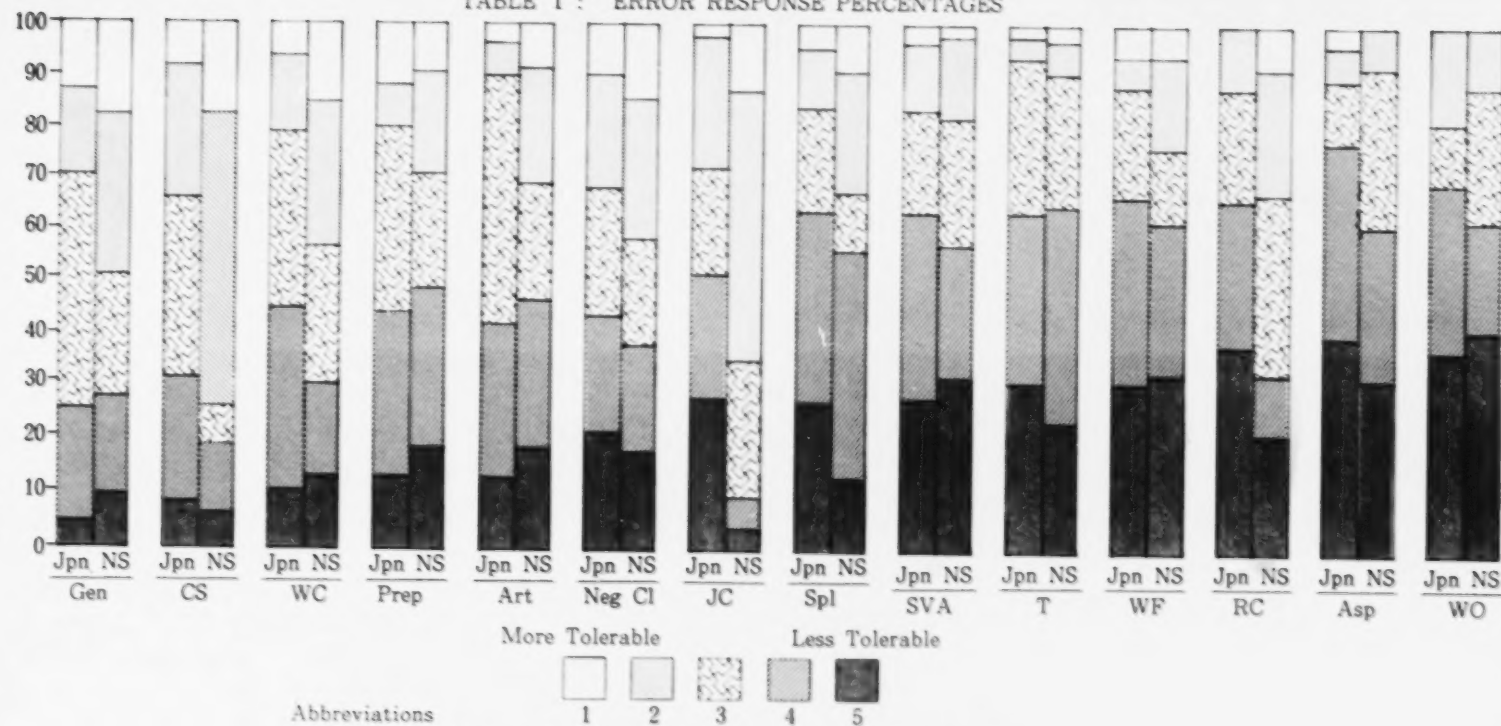
The sentences on the questionnaire were mixed up so that the same types of errors would not follow each other. About 30 questionnaires were given to members of each group and after approximately three months passed, 33 of the 60 forms were returned. This is a reasonable rate of response considering the hectic schedules of both Japanese and foreign English teachers.

The Results

Table 1 shows the percent of responses on a 5-point scale for each of the 14 error types. The errors are shown in order of acceptability: those on the left are more acceptable and those on the right are less acceptable. Supporting studies mentioned above, the results of this study indicate that errors are evaluated in a hierarchy. The error types in this study were slightly different from those in previous studies, but the general conclusion of Vann, Meyer, and Lorenze (1984) was supported: the more an error obscures meaning, the less it is tolerated. Thus, a word order error causes much confusion for the reader so it judged less tolerable. However, errors which do not detract from communicability (of/-s genitive, comma splice, word choice, preposition, and article mistakes) are judged as more tolerable.

Unlike some of the above-mentioned studies, this research did not show a great difference in the error perceptions of the non-native and native speaking teachers in general. The three errors which were perceived differently were of/-s genitive ("a uniform of *kendoo*"), the misplacement of judgemental clauses, and spelling. Native teachers seemed to perceive the of/-s genitive as slightly unnatural, whereas Japanese were much less accepting of the misplacement of judgemental clauses and spelling. The Indian subjects in Sheorey's study (1986) were also less tolerant of spelling errors. It is remarkable, however, that both groups are often in accord in the perception of most error types in this study. An explanation may be the particularly high English-language proficiency of the non-native speaking subjects in this study. As university professors with ample experience living, studying, and working in English-speaking nations for extended periods of time, the subjects could be manifesting a native-like tolerance for grammatical errors in writing.

TABLE 1 : ERROR RESPONSE PERCENTAGES



Conclusions and Implications

Because of the small size of this sample, the conclusions presented must be considered tentative. On the other hand, this study supports other research in that it shows there is an error gravity hierarchy. This finding may support the hypothesis that the more an error impedes comprehensibility, the less tolerable it will be. It seems that Japanese and foreign teachers generally agree in their perceptions of errors and the overall high rate of tolerance of most errors in this study may be because of the high ability of the Japanese respondents.

The pedagogical implications of this study are clear. Errors are perceived by an academic audience as more or less severe, so writing teachers should focus remedial attention on students who commit frequent errors in word order, aspect, relative clauses, word form, and tense because the academic audience seems to be less tolerant of these types of mistakes. On the other hand, teachers should attach a low priority to errors which do not interfere with meaning: of/-s genitive, comma splice, preposition, and article. Thus, because many grammatical errors do not obscure communication and so are perceived as tolerable, writing teachers should not be overly concerned with marking and/or correcting every such mistake in students' compositions. Such meticulousness leads to student discouragement and teacher burnout.

The final implication of this study is that writing teachers would do well to adopt a middle course. Students receive great benefits when teachers help them learn how to organize and develop clear writing. Yet, correction of grammatical errors serves a beneficial purpose, also. Motivated students seem to expect some correction and are dismayed if their work is rarely marked. Also, there is not other way to rid student writing of consistent errors (i. e. "Everybody don't. . . ." "I came Okinawa. . . ." "The life of human being. . . ." and on and on) unless teachers point them out (Webb, 1988). To achieve balance in the teaching of organization of content and the correction of grammatical errors, writing teachers must understand the expectations of the audiences of student writing. I hope that this study was a small step in the direction of understanding the standards of correctness of the university community in Japan.

Notes

I wish to thank Professor Katsunobu Sunagawa for his helpful suggestions on this paper. His comments are greatly appreciated. Of course, any errors, mistakes, and goofs are my own responsibility.

¹ The errors indicated by Bryant (1984) were aspect, misplacement of judgemental clause, unidiomatic negative clause, and of/-s genitive. Those from Vann, Meyer, and Lorenze (1984) were article, subject/verb agreement, preposition, tense, word choice, word order, comma splice, relative clause, and spelling. Finally, after checking more than a few compositions here in Japan for the last two years, I feel that Japanese students make many word form errors.

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Appendix

Error Categories

Of/-s Genitive

1. The nicest gift I have ever received was a uniform of *kendo*.
2. Chinese cuisine is famous for using various unusual ingredients, such as palms of bears, tongues of pigeons, or nests of swallows.

Comma Splice

1. American teachers generally come to class exactly on time, they are seldom late by even a couple of minutes.
2. North Americans are very concerned with being on time, they don't like to waste time by having to wait for someone who is late, they like to spend time wisely by keeping busy.

Word Choice

1. After the U. S. failed the Vietnam War, some Americans wanted to forget all about it.
2. From a biological point of view, men and women are similiar bodily.

Preposition

1. It is a famous diet used at Hollywood.
2. I came Okinawa with about 20 others to take an exam at Ryudai.

Article

1. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is very famous proverb.
2. North Americans have a acute sense of time.

Unidiomatic Use of Negative Clause

1. There is no country that doesn't notice time at all.
2. There can't be any person who isn't influenced by the stream of time.

Misplacement of Judgemental Clause

1. In Japan, working people must obey schedules, I guess.
2. Life in those days was not easy, I suppose.

Spelling

1. She was an idle to millions of fans for many years.
2. This phenominum occurs when wind passes over a mountain.

Subject/Verb Agreement

1. They never seems to hurry.
2. After a Japanese father gets up on Sunday, the family then do something together.

Tense

1. Over forty years have passed since World War II ends.
2. People want to know how Einstein prove his theory.

Word Form

1. People will inference from the title that the book is about economics.
2. If they asked, I would advice them on three points.

Relative Clause

1. People live in tropical places have a tendency to be active at night.
2. Students are told the times which they must hand in assignments.

Aspect

1. I was belonging to the judo club.
2. He was knowing almost everything about his specialty.

Word Order

1. Television programs in Latin America are usually late to start more than one hour.
2. The more the work is difficult, my pleasure is the more.

The Scale

Please use the 5-point acceptability scale below to rank the following sentence-level errors. The scale consists of guidelines based on considerations of writing content and intended audience. "Less edited writing" refers to assignments such as first drafts, journals, and essay exams. "More edited writing" refers to assignments that involve more time and care such as term papers and dissertations.

- 1—Tolerable in more edited writing for a wide audience (i. e. a dissertation, material for conference or publication)
- 2—Tolerable in more edited writing for a restricted audience (i. e. class presentations, your colleagues)
- 3—Tolerable but only in less edited writing for a restricted audience (i. e. class members)
- 4—Tolerable but only in less edited writing for an extremely restricted audience (i. e. yourself only)
- 5—Never tolerable in any kind of writing